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AUTHOR Smith, Lawrence G.
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ABSTRACT

Deans of Instruction or Presidents of 94 junior colleges were asked what percentage of their faculty used a non-punitive A, B, C, W (withdraw) grading system, with no failing or F grade. The data shows a growing interest in such grading practices. There are three main arguments in favor of non-punitive grading: (1) an F grade is a double penalty, requiring better-than-average grades to counterbalance it; (2) fear of an F may impair the performance of anxiety-prone students; (3) A-F grading systems discourage experimentation outside of one's major field. Arguments against the non-punitive grading system are that (1) a potential F grade is an incentive to do better work; (2) failure occurs in life and it is unrealistic to exclude it from the academic world; (3) F or D grades that result in students' dismissal open up space for more qualified students. It is felt that this last reason is the most valid. In view of limited educational resources, it is suggested that schools have a dismissal policy based on some number of withdrawal grades. (MS)

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NON-PUNITIVE GRADING IN CALIFORNIA JUNIOR COLLEGES

by

Lawrence G. Smith*

At almost one-fifth of California's community colleges all of the faculty will be using some form of non-punitive grading system in academic year 1969-1970. At almost one-quarter of the colleges at least 50 percent of the faculty will be using an actual or de facto ABCW system.

In July, 1969, the Deans of Instruction or Presidents of 94 colleges were asked the following question: "Approximately what percentage of your faculty would you guess is using an A,B,C,W (with possibly an optional D) grading scheme?" Their replies are summarized in Table 1 below.

(See Table 1 next page)

Since few Deans or Presidents were reacting from "hard" data, Table 1 should be interpreted with some skepticism. However, it is a pretty good bet that most Deans and Presidents have a very good "feel" for faculty sentiment and practice on this issue. Since I have no way of estimating each Dean's or President's margin of error without a full faculty survey, I assume that over and underassessments of the percentage will cancel out.

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* Lawrence G. Smith is instructor of economics at Grossmont College in El Cajon, California.

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TABLE I

CALIFORNIA JUNIOR COLLEGES USING ABCW GRADING,

1968-1969 and 1969-1970

Percent of Faculty Using ABCW	Reported 1968-1969		Predicted 1969-1970		"Implied" 1969-1970	
	Number	Percent[a]	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
0 - 5%	36	38%	5	5%	36	38%
5 - 10	3	3	0	0	3	3
10 - 20	2	2	0	0	1	1
20 - 30	3	3	2	2	5	5
30 - 40	1	1	1	1	2	2
40 - 50	0	0	0	0	0	0
50 - 60	2	2	0	0	2	2
60 - 70	0	0	0	0	0	0
70 - 80	3	3	0	0	2	2
80 - 90	1	1	0	0	1	1
90 -100	13	14	8	9	17	18
Deans unwilling or unable to answer	22	24	70	74	17	18
No response from school	8	8	8	8	8	8
Totals	94	99%[b]	94	99%	94	98%

[a]Using N = 94 as a base.

[b]Totals do not add to 100 because of rounding error.

Source: Survey conducted in July, 1969. Names of individual schools in each cell will be furnished on request of author.

Some responders gave me only actual 1968-1969 practice, some only predicted the 1969-1970 percentage (without offering actual 1968-69 practice), and some gave me both. The first two distributions describe these "Reported" and "Predicted" data. If we assume that no faculty member will change his mind from 1968-1969 to 1969-1970 (an improbable assumption!) an "Implied" 1969-1970 distribution is derived. This distribution, the last shown in Table 1, is the combination of the "Reported" and "Predicted" distributions, allowance being made for double counting and individual schools moving to a higher percentage category. For example, three schools reported that between 20 and 30 percent of their faculty were using ABCW during 1968-1969. Two <u>different</u> schools predicted that they would be in this same category for 1969-1970. Since there were no schools common to both years in this bracket, the "Implied" number for 1969-1970 is five.

"Reported," "Predicted," and "Implied," are not directly comparable because of the irregularity of reporting and predicting both years. Hence, few ultra-reliable "trend" observations can be made. However, I would guess that a direct comparison of the "Implied" 1969-1970 usages and the actual usage of, say, 1966-1967 would show a dramatic increase.

The "Implied" distribution no doubt represents a minimum estimate of the extent of use of non-punitive systems.[1] Several Deans of schools in the 0-5% bracket indicated to me that "many more" faculty would like

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[1] A review of the 1968-1969 and 1969-1970 catalogs suggests also that there is a dramatic move to "de facto" non-punitive schemes. At least 48 out of 94 schools will have limited Credit/No credit programs in 1969-1970 and at least 9 schools (not including the 17 "Implied" ABCW schools) will allow students to withdraw without penalty past the 12th semester week. At least 48% of the schools will allow a no-penalty withdrawal <u>past</u> the sixth week in 1969-1970.

to use the system but refrain from doing so because it is not official school policy. Many schools, also in the 0-5% bracket, indicated that the system is under "serious study" and will "almost surely be adopted as school-wide policy in some subsequent year." Lastly, I think that few faculty who adopt the system will revert to the traditional A - F scheme; hence, the reasonableness of the "no changing the mind" assumption, at least in the direction of abandoning the newly-adopted ABCW system.

In addition to the percentages cited in the opening paragraph of this article, the other striking feature of the "Implied" 1969-1970 distribution is the distinct clustering of schools at both the low or high ends. One reason for this may be simply that faculty wait for the policy to be established officially before using it. However, only 8 of the 17 schools in the 90 - 100% category have officially adopted the policy. In the remaining 9 schools individual faculty members no doubt simply drop all failing students on or before the official last-day-to-drop date.

Recognizing the tentative nature of the 1969-1970 data, we can ask, "What accounts for this rather sudden interest in and actual usage of a system that eliminates F grades?" I think that the answer is relatively straightforward: The arguments in favor of the system are rather persuasive and the most effective counter-argument is rarely advanced with any degree of articulation. The "pros" are simply prevailing, almost by default.

Arguments <u>for</u> non-punitive grading usually take at least three directions:

1. "An F grade is a double penalty; it not only grants no credit but must be counter-balanced by better-than-usual work elsewhere."

Two students, alike in all respects, could enroll for 60 units and earn an even C average. If, in addition, the first student also took a course in summer school and failed it, he would not graduate, even though he may, in fact, have more total knowledge than the graduate. That is, current practices treat a failing grade as if it indicated a loss in knowledge.[2]

2. "Fear of an F grade may lessen the performance of anxiety-prone students."

Stallings[3] indicates that research results show it is indeed true that fear of low grades stimulates anxious students to a level of arousal such that learning effectiveness is impaired. He also indicates, however, that fear of a low grade stimulates non-anxious students to a less complacent arousal level with a resulting increase in learning effectiveness. If a school adopts ABCW school-wide, then, it may actually decrease learning if a large fraction of its students is not anxiety-prone.

3. "A - F grading systems discourage experimentation outside of one's field of special interest."

The only research on this question that I am aware of is indirect. Sgan[4] reports that the first year of pass-fail (fear of a "low" B,C, or D is eliminated) at Brandeis was accompanied by wide-spread experimentation outside of major fields.

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[2] I am indebted to a policy statement from Southwestern College (Chula Vista) for this illustration.

[3] W.M. Stallings, "Pass-Fail Grading Option," School & Society, March 16, 1968.

[4] Mathew R. Sgan, "First Year of Pass-Fail at Brandeis University," Journal of Higher Education, February, 1969.

Arguments <u>against</u> non-punitive grading usually take these three tacks:

1. "A potential F grade provides an incentive for a student to do better work. After all, not every student thirsts for knowledge."

Again, it all depends on the fraction of non-anxious students.

2. "Failure occurs in the non-academic world; to create a failure-less academia would provide students with a false image of the real world."

True, but do we need <u>double</u> penalties?

3. "F or D grades provide, in conjunction with some sort of dismissal criteria, a mechanism for opening up slots for potentially more qualified students."

This "scarce resources" argument is, I think, the most persuasive counterargument and is also the most ignored, misunderstood, or denied. As such, it may be well to digress slightly and discuss the reasonableness of the statement itself and then consider its application to non-punitive grading.

Consider the assertion "Resources are scarce relative to wants." Some of the popular literature tends to reject or ignore this. Yet its negative, "Resources are <u>not</u> scarce" is widely inconsistent with experience. To see this, suppose that the negative is true. In this case, no one would be unsatisfied in the society. The newspapers would be free of middle and upper income class complaints about taxes; they would be free of low income class complaints about poverty; they would be free of calls for the "setting of national priorities." There would be no complaints or calls for priorities because everyone could have all that he wanted by wishing for it or, alternatively, everyone was simply completely satisfied.

A casual glance at the daily newspapers suggests the complete falsity of the negative. We infer, therefore, that resources <u>are</u> scarce relative to wants.

At any given point in time resources devoted to schooling are relatively scarce, in the above usage. If some policy change increases the demand for these resources, some method must be found to allocate the available schooling over and among a now larger number of competing claimants (students). A school moving to an ABCW grading system will find that the demand for its services has increased for at least two reasons: (1) With no change in the school's probation/dismissal policy there will be eventually, as a matter of arithmetic, no one with a grade point average less than C. Those that would have been dismissed will presumably remain, although not indefinitely. (2) To the extent that a failure-less grading system is more attractive than one involving F's, more students than before will wish to attend this school.

Suppose that a particular school has, in fact, adopted this policy. By the above discussion it will face increased enrollment and must, if possible, provide the resources necessary to service the extra enrollment. The crucial question to society is, then, "Is it worth it?" That is, are we willing to forego the goods and services that could have been produced with the resources that must now be diverted into additional schooling? The answer will turn on the magnitudes of the extra benefits and costs involved.

Certain benefits will obviously accrue to the students "carried along" and to society. Among other benefits, the students will earn higher incomes, derive more satisfaction from life, and pay more taxes.

On the cost side there are, in principle, two distinct cases with respect to the school's ability to handle the extra student-hours: (1) The school possesses "excess capacity." In this case the extra benefits conferred on students almost surely outweigh the extra cost of a slightly higher teaching load and perhaps an extra teacher or two. (2) The school has no "excess capacity." In this case the extra cost of opening an entire new school may not be balanced by expected benefits. Thus, the school may be forced to restrict admissions, open door or no open door.

A new cost to society may now enter the picture. Because students are currently enrolled that might otherwise have been dismissed there exists the very real possibility that some potentially more qualified students are denied admission. In these days of increasing enrollments and increasing public antagonism toward higher education I do not think that this is an idle fear.

To argue against ABCW on these grounds, then, is to speak for the invisible potential student. He is not yet on the scene, so he is not yet so voluble or cow-eyed. But he might, for example, be a talented Black trying for a first go at college. He might not. I do not know the empirical magnitudes of the relevant extra costs and benefits of an ABCW policy. It may, in point of fact, turn out that under all conditions the benefits exceed the costs at the junior college level. Because of the relatively low direct costs and low foregone earnings involved I strongly suspect that this is the case.

One bright note is that a school converting to ABCW may avert the problem somewhat if, at the time of conversion, it changes its dismissal

policy so as to dismiss a student whenever the student acquires some arbitrary number of withdrawal grades, this number set by the school. It seems to me particularly crucial that schools take this step.

Non-punitive grading systems are being widely accepted in California and elsewhere. Let's make sure that we do not forget the potential entrants.

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